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ABSTRACT

The first-semester orientation course at Irvine Valley College (IVC), in California, a non-required course taught by counselors, covers time management, study skills, academic policies, career and academic major exploration, and support services. In an effort to evaluate the effectiveness of the course, a study was conducted of the 1990 freshman cohort. The study population was divided into full-time and part-time students, and was further classified by orientation course status as successful students (those receiving letter grades of A, B, C, or Credit); unsuccessful students (D, F, Withdraw, NoCredit); and students who did not take the orientation course. Independent variables of the study included grade point average (GPA), course passrate, units earned, and return rate for spring and fall of 1991. In addition, a survey was administered toward the end of the semester asking students in the orientation course how sure they were of their college major and career goals at three points since applying to IVC. Study findings included the following: (1) successful course completers (SS) included 144 full-time and 56 part-time students, unsuccessful students included 26 full-time and 31 part-time students, while 87 full-time and 322 part-time students did not attend the course (NA); (2) both full- and part-time SS's had higher persistence rates through three semesters (59.7% and 39.3%, respectively) than full- and part-time NA's (34.5% and 27.3%, respectively); (3) differences in GPA's, units earned, and pass rates for SS's and NA's were not statistically significant; and (4) SS's reported much stronger career and academic goal focus by the end of the course. Data tables are included. (PAA)

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Introduction and Purpose of the Study

A recent study examined the effectiveness of a two-unit, first-semester orientation course designed to help new students succeed in attaining their educational goals. Although the course isn't required, new students undergoing a freshmen pre-orientation session prior to course registration are strongly urged to sign up for the class. The course, taught by counselors, incorporates features of *Becoming a Master Student* (Ellis, 1991), covers time management, study skills, academic policies, career and academic major exploration, and campus support services. An important course requirement is that each student must complete a detailed educational plan which specifies the courses he or she will take while attending Irvine Valley.

Method

After sorting data on the fall 1990 freshman cohort into full-time and part-time groups, we did a further sort by orientation course status: successful completers (A, B, C, or Credit), unsuccessful (D, F, W, NoCredit), and those who didn't take the course. We then tracked GPA, course passrate (the rate at which students passed all their courses), units earned, the spring 1991 semester return rate, and the fall 1991 semester return rate for all students. Near the end of the course in the fall semester of 1990, we administered a survey. Students were asked to estimate how sure they were about their college major and career/vocational goals at three different times: 1) when they applied to the college, 2) when they went through a pre-registration orientation-to-college session, and 3) right then, at the end of the orientation course. For each situation, students were asked to choose from the following scale:

very sure__ somewhat sure__ not too sure__ undecided__.

Results

The various outcome measures are summarized below. When compared to students who didn't take the orientation course, both full-time and part-time orientation course completers had better persistence through three semesters of college. The three semester retention rate for full-time students who completed the course (59.7%) was significantly greater than for students who did not take the course (34.5%) ($z=3.76$, $p < .01$). Among part-time students, those taking the course were retained at 39.3% compared to 27.3% for those who hadn't had the course ($z=1.82$, $p > .05$). Except for students who were unsuccessful in the orientation course, the other measures (GPA, units earned, etc.) tended to be fairly similar across the groups.

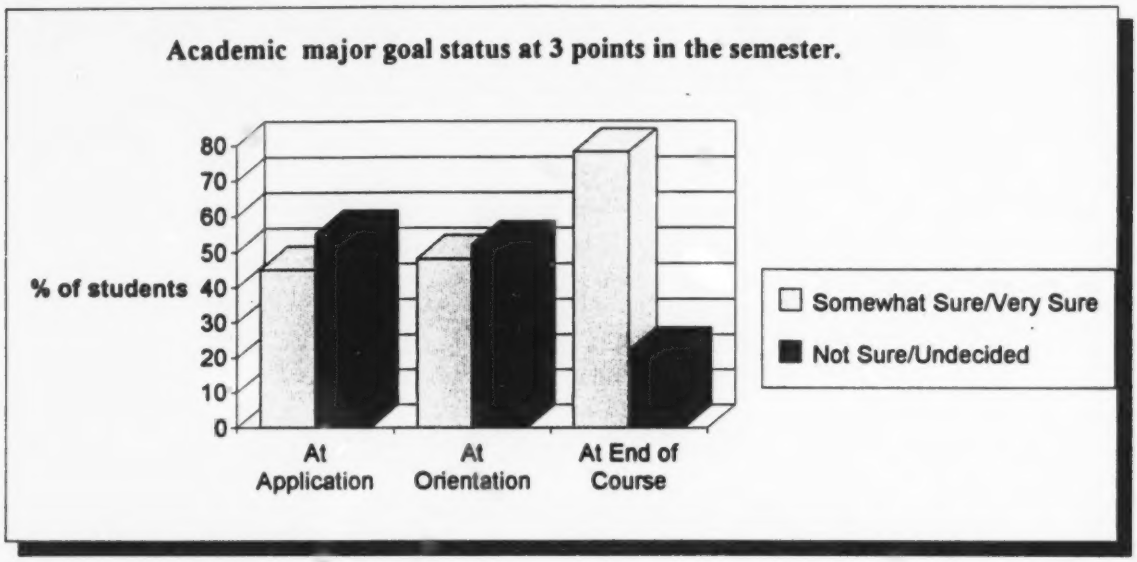
ORIENTATION COURSE STATUS

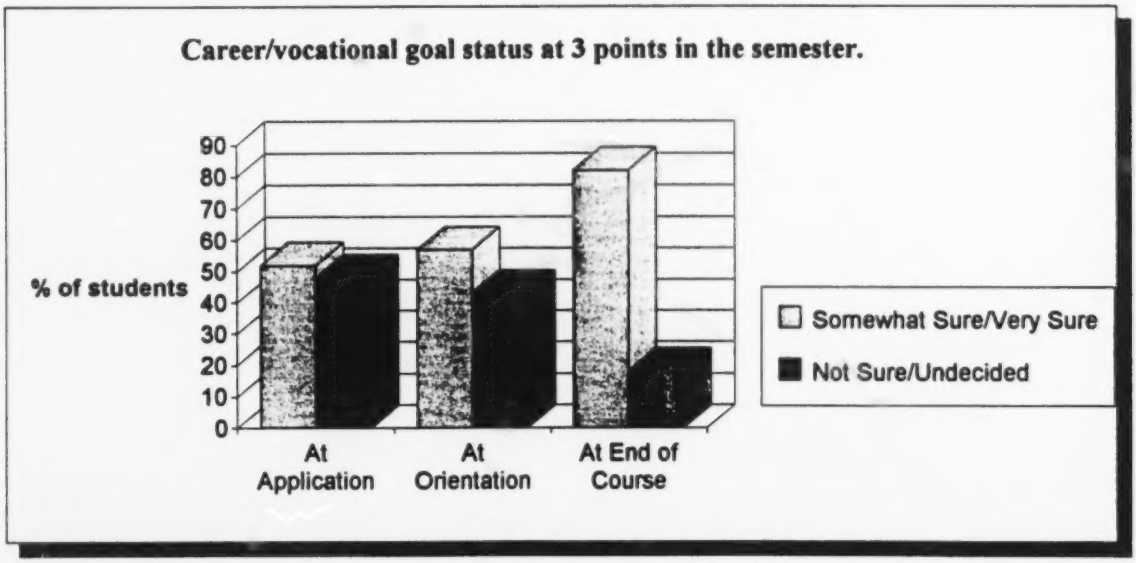
	Successful		Unsuccessful		Didn't Take	
	full-time*	part-time	full-time	part-time	full-time	part-time
Headcount	(144)	(56)	(26)	(31)	(87)	(322)
Fall 1990 Semester GPA	2.82	2.82	1.75	0.95	2.65	2.97
Fall 1990 Units Earned	12.0	6.0	7.7	3.0	11.7	6.3
Spring 1991 Return Rate	86%	57%	54%	38%	72%	53%
Fall 1991 Return Rate	59.7%	39.3%	42.3%	19.4%	34.5%	27.3%
Fall 1991 Course Passrate	77.1%	67.7%	41.2%	41.7%	66.4%	67.4%
Cum-GPA as of Fall 1991**	2.68	2.81	2.09	2.68	2.76	2.75
Total Units Earned as of Fall 1991**	36.4	21.3	21.1	13.6	33.7	22.7

* Full-time includes students taking 4 or more classes. Part-time includes students taking fewer than 4 classes.

** It is important to note that cumulative GPA and Total Units Earned (bottom 2 rows of the table) represent averages for the survivors, and doesn't include those who dropped out by the fall of 1991.

As shown below, students reported a much stronger goal focus for academic major and career/vocational aspirations at the end of the orientation course.





Discussion and Conclusions

The results support the notion that the orientation course helps students form more focused academic and career goals. As a further check, a future survey will include a group of first-semester freshmen who did not take the orientation course (control group). If, at the end of the 8-week orientation course, the controls show no comparable increase in goal clarity compared to those who successfully completed the orientation course, we will have stronger evidence that the course is helping students to focus their goals.

A skeptic might argue that self-motivation, not the orientation course, is responsible for the greater retention rate shown by the course completers. Because the orientation course provides students with college survival skills and a detailed academic plan for their stay at the college, I firmly believe that the course, not simply motivation, is helping students to stay in college. The course is an efficient way to provide students with valuable information which they otherwise must acquire in bits and pieces, by chance, if at all. I should also mention that we have data from other cohorts which show retention trends similar to those reported here.

An unexpected finding was that some students did poorly in the orientation course. Upon closer examination, we discovered that these students tended to do poorly in all their classes and, as such, constituted a readily identifiable "at risk" group. Counselors teaching this course have been advised to look for and work with these students, because these students are heading for academic problems. Our initial attempts to better understand and profile this newly identified at-risk group have been unsuccessful; it seems these students do poorly for a wide array of reasons.

Our findings reinforce the notion that many students often are unclear as to their goals and suffer from a lack of systematic, valid information about college and college survival. A well-designed orientation course is an excellent way for students to begin their college careers. The course can teach students success strategies, help students to form realistic and focused academic and career goals and to formulate a detailed academic plan which leads to their goals. More than one of our counselors have told me that since the inception of the orientation course, there has been a commensurate increase in the sophistication of questions students ask when they appear for drop-in counseling sessions. We've found the orientation course to be an excellent way to provide students with the advisement component of California's recently enacted community college Matriculation Regulations. One wonders why many community colleges don't have a *mandatory* orientation to college course.

References

Ellis, David, *Becoming a Master Student*. College Survival Inc., 1991.